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Tet and Dienbienphu

SAIGON—There will be more bad news before there is good news, unless Hanoi's war planners are astonishingly unlucky. In the central highlands of this country, hardly more than one government division is opposing three North Vietnamese divisions, and as these words are written, the North Vietnamese drive to take Kon-tum City has not begun in earnest.

Hereabouts, in the provinces surrounding Saigon, the signs suggest that Hanoi has already had bad luck. The order to take Anloc "at all costs" has in fact cost a good part of another three North Vietnamese divisions. The South Vietnamese have also suffered heavy losses; but unless Saigon is really appallingly unfortunate, the other side is due for eventual defeat in this area.

Meanwhile, however, all depends on the battle in the North. The rest will hardly matter if the new corps commander in the North, the brave and able Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, can only organize a solid defense of Hue.

Or rather the rest will hardly matter, unless the present outlook in the provinces around Saigon proves to be deceptive. Heavy government losses in the center will not bring the victory that Hanoi seeks. In the north or hereabouts, the war will be won or lost.

ALL HANGS upon a knife edge, in sum. But it is still worth noting that as matters stand today, Hanoi can lose this war, as well as win it. This is the first time Hanoi has risked so much since the second struggle for Vietnam began.

The analogy, ominously, is with the battle at Dienbienphu in 1954. By that time, the Communists were perilously close to exhaustion in their war with the French. But they had two uncommitted assets, which they used for a decisive gamble.

The assets were a couple of fresh divisions, committed in China, across the border, plus a large number of big guns, such as the French troops had never seen. The French high command did not believe the big guns could be deployed and used. But the French high command was dead wrong. So the two fresh divisions plus

the new big guns, won the battle at Dienbienphu.

All successful generals tend to repeat themselves. The worst feature of General Vo Nguyen Giap's plan for the Tet offensive in 1968, was an attempt to make the siege of Khesanh into a mini-Dienbienphu. Giap wasted two divisions at Khesanh that might just have been enough to turn Tet into an irreversible disaster.

This time, the repetition in the planning is again clear. As at Dienbienphu, all of Hanoi's remaining reserves have been committed to the great offensive. Even the North Vietnamese training depots are being cannibalized, to get raw cannon fodder. And as at Dienbienphu, the unprecedented North Vietnamese employment of both armor and heavy artillery has introduced a quite new element into the fighting.

Yet the analogy, although ominous, also has its other side as well. In interviews with Communist journalists after Dienbienphu, General Giap himself admitted that literally everything had been risked upon this one last throw of the military dice. Defeat would have followed, he admitted, if that single battle had not been won, or even if the French had had the will to continue the war for another year after the battle.

THIS IS WHERE the present offensive recalls Tet in 1968. That year, general Giap was fairly prudent in his use of North Vietnam's army. But he ruthlessly committed the entire armed forces of the Vietcong of South Vietnam. In the upshot, after a very hard time, the armed forces of the Vietcong were just about completely destroyed. And the Vietcong never recovered thereafter.

This year, as already noted, the entire armed forces of North Vietnam have been committed, with equal ruthlessness. The price already paid has been so high that one hates to think of it. There is hard intelligence for instance, that the North Vietnamese divisions have already sent 22,000 wounded back up the trail towards Hanoi.

This year, moreover, the North Vietnamese invaders will be defeated in the end—unless they are the winners. There can be no indecisive stalemate, in other words. If the Saigon government's troops are not smashed, then the North Vietnamese will be irreversibly smashed.

It is well, then, to remember how dark the outlook seemed in 1968, at the climax of Tet, before the Vietcong forces were irreversibly smashed. But it is well, above all, to say a prayer for Ngo Quang Truong, rallying his regiments before Hue. Packing to go home at a breathless moment, this reporter registers that prayer.

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"But you can't leave home, Junior! . . . Daddy and I depend on you to hold our marriage together."

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Humphrey's New Problem

TWO MONTHS AGO, Howard M. Metzbaum, a leading aspirant for the 1974 Democratic senatorial nomination in Ohio, pointedly sought out Frank King, Ohio's AFL-CIO chief, to say that although he "loved" Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey, he would have to stay scrupulously neutral in the Ohio presidential primary election.

Thus King was not only stunned but furious when Metzbaum broke that pledge and gave Sen. George McGovern a ringing endorsement last Sunday at a United Jewish Appeal rally in Cleveland. Adding insult to injury, Humphrey himself was on the speakers' platform when Metzbaum threw his arm around McGovern.

Quite apart from the affront to Humphrey and King (who was Humphrey's virtual campaign manager in last Tuesday's Ohio primary), that last minute endorsement boldly underlined an important political fact: the ambitious Metzbaum went for broke on his assumption that total alienation of Ohio's powerful

labor hierarchy and Humphrey himself was a price worth paying to get McGovern backing for his 1974 Senate campaign.

Whether or not Metzbaum's bet will pay off in the end, McGovern's performance in the all-important blue-collar working-class wards of Ohio was impressive. In the 6th ward of the steel-and-labor town of Lorain, overwhelmingly working class, Humphrey edged out McGovern by only the bare margin of 961 to 828. That ward is adjacent to the big U.S. Steel plant in South Lorain. In one Lorain precinct after another, McGovern and Humphrey were neck-and-neck, with McGovern edging out Humphrey in both the city and Lorain County.

Likewise, in the rubber town of Akron, surrounding Summit County, all projections in the still incomplete vote-count (as this was written) show McGovern running neck and neck with labor-backed Humphrey, a fact that "astonished" Frank King.

Accordingly, McGovern demonstrated an appeal

among rank-and-file workmen and women in the Midwest heartland state of Ohio that the shrewdest Ohio Democratic politicians did not think possible. The "McGovern Phenomenon" with his oil-and-water blend of populism and far-out positions on pot, abortion and draft-dodger amnesty, has far from run its course.

FOR HUMPHREY, however, there were mitigating circumstances. In Lorain County, for example, Humphrey never showed up to campaign despite many promises. He stayed out to avoid affronting the regular Democratic organization, committed almost wholly to the non-active candidacy of Sen. Edmund Muskie (who polled just over 10 per cent of the county's total vote).

McGovern, under no such restraints with his anti-establishment crusade, courted workers in every precinct and toured the county preaching his pungent appeal for voters "fed up" with contemporary American life to vote for him.

That McGovern appeal, moreover, was immeasurably strengthened in Ohio by the absence of Gov. George W.